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A FURTHER STUDY OF THE HEROIC TETRAMETER

There is a type of line in heroic verse which, like the rest of heroic verse, is usually classed as a pentameter, but which to my mind is properly a tetrameter. Examples of this type are found in the lines:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever;
To point a moral or adorn a tale;
The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power;
Battle's magnificently stern array;
And all went merry as a marriage bell;
Trip the pert fairies and the dapper elves;
And, like Limander, am I trusty still.
And I, like Helen, till the Fates me kill;
And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab;
Remould it, nearer to the heart's desire;
Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

In two earlier papers¹ I have presented evidence that the line is a tetrameter, and in this paper further evidence will be presented to support the same position.

But if the line is a tetrameter, what then? Why, to say that the line is a tetrameter implies a fundamental criticism of the commonly accepted ways of studying metrics. It means that we have been using a system of measurement which has not enabled us to distinguish between four and five feet except in simple cases, say between

The stag at eve had drunk his fill
and

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

In the more difficult case, to be discussed, we have accepted the judgment of tradition that the line is a pentameter, without questioning this judgment any too closely. We have defined pentameter lines as those lines which tradition has called pentameter.

¹ "A Type of Four-Stress Verse in Shakespeare," *New Shakespeareana*, January, 1911;
"A Scientific Basis for Metrics," *Modern Language Notes*, May, 1913.

But now, in departing from tradition, let us state at once the definitions and assumptions on which our work is based. They are as follows:

1. A line may not be classed until it has been read, or at least is supposed to have been read. In defense of this principle, we may say that it is verse *as it sounds* which concerns us; verse as it looks has nothing to do with meters. In terms of print it is difficult to say what tetrameter means. In terms of sound, then:

2. A line will be called *tetrameter* if a given reading suggests four equal time-parts, called *feet* or measures. Here is a definition which means something, no matter how objectionable it may be to some readers, for we *can* read lines so as to suggest four equal time-parts. A crude way of doing this would be to read the line

The stág at éve had drúnk his fíll

so as to make the *stressed vowels* (that is, the vowels which divide the verse) coincide with consecutive beats of a metronome. But it is not necessary to read our poetry to a metronome in order to suggest equal time-parts any more than to play our music in this way. Gabrilowitsch brings out Chopin's rhythms rather well, but he would make a poor showing by the side of a metronome, if we should allow the metronome to judge.

The objection may be raised that time-parts and measures are all very well for music, but we are dealing with verse, and the phenomena of verse may not be explained in terms of time-parts and measures. Anyone who believes this, and thinks with Mr. Saintsbury that time is "a word of fear in prosody" and that by its use "great and unnecessary mischief is likely to be done," will not be interested further in this paper, for it will seem to him that a classification of verse with respect to time is of no importance.

But, taking the time basis for granted, let us define the given type¹ as a tetrameter which becomes a heroic pentameter if the second foot is read as two feet of two syllables each. For example,

A thínġ of béauty is a jóy foréver

¹ Professor Gummere (F. B. Gummere, "On the Translation of Beowulf," *American Journal of Philology*, VII [1896], 57 ff.), writing from a different point of view and on a different problem, describes lines of this type by saying that they have four strong stresses, a heaping up of light syllables in the middle of the line, and a weak stress. He would count this weak stress in the middle of the line as one of five stresses, still calling the lines pentameter. Without discussing Professor Gummere's definitions, or his interesting and

is a heroic tetrameter, because if we read the second foot as two feet,

A thínġ of béauty ís a jóy forevéř,

we have the familiar heroic pentameter.¹

Let us distinguish the heroic tetrameter from certain other lines. In general it has ten syllables, but the definition "a tetrameter line of ten syllables" would not be exact, for the reason that there are other ten-syllable tetrameters, for example, the doggerel line

Fell óver the thréshóld and bróke my shín.

[*Love's Labour's Lost.*]

Again, not in heroic verse,

To a spéedíng wínd and a bóundíng wáve;

[Browning, *Song, Paracelsus.*]

Séntencing to éxile the bríght Sun-Gód.

[Meredith, *Phoebus.*]

In heroic verse, Shakespeare and Milton write a number of ten-syllable tetrameters that are not of our type; for example:

Thánk me no thánkíngs, nor próud me no próuds;

[*Romeo and Juliet.*]

To the gárden of blíss, thy séat prépared;

[*Paradise Lost.*]

and Donne is fond of using in heroic verse a tetrameter which again is not of our type, for example:

Will háve me cut úp to survéy each párt.

The reason we discard these lines in forming our definition is that no one of them is used often enough to give it the distinction of a norm, while the line that we are considering is found in every type of heroic verse, in blank verse, couplets, quatrains, sonnets.

valuable article, I reach a different conclusion in terms of my own definitions, since I make these lines tetrameters, and Professor Gummere's "weak stress" becomes in my classification no stress at all. This does not mean necessarily a contradiction of Professor Gummere's results, since I am using the word "stress" in a different sense.

¹ It would be quite possible, of course, to turn a pentameter into a tetrameter by doubling up, say, the third and fourth feet instead of the second and third, for example:

Here fállíng hóúses thúnder on your héads

(cf. Gummere, *loc. cit.*; the stresses are mine), but the usage among readers is not so common. Readers do not make heroic lines tetrameters just because they happen to have four "strong stresses," for if so, about two-thirds of heroic verse would be read tetrameter and this is not the case (Gummere, *loc. cit.*; also E. A. Abbott, *A Shakespearean Grammar*, p. 330). Instead of two lines in three only about one line in ten is read tetrameter.

So much in order to distinguish the given line from other tetrameters. But may the line be fairly called a tetrameter? It is a tetrameter if readers and poets make it so. What evidence have we at hand?

First, an experiment in the psychological laboratory¹ showed that, as a matter of actual time taken in the reading, three readers divided lines of the given type into four parts approximately equal, rather than into five, thus making certain readings of heroic lines tetrameters on the objective evidence of the recording instrument. Let us consider also evidence on the subjective side. As far as my observation has gone during the last eight years, every reader of heroic verse makes heroic tetrameter of certain lines; but this much is noteworthy, that, in general (with the exception of musicians, who are accustomed to measure time-values with the ear), the more clearly a line has been read tetrameter, the more stoutly the reader insists that he has read it pentameter. In general, the better the reader the worse his analysis, until his attention is caught by some such device as the following. Consider Milton's couplet

Ánd from rebéllion shall dérive his náme
Thóugh of rebéllion óthers hé accúse.

The metrical importance of "others" is so great that the line containing it is read pentameter. The metrical importance of "shall" is so slight that the line containing it is read tetrameter. To show the difference between the lines, suppose that we reverse the scansion:

Ánd from rebéllion sháll dérive his náme
Thóugh of rebéllion others hé accúse.

The reading will probably be found unnatural and highly artificial, and probably we should never hear the passage read in this way, except as an exercise. We should all read as pentameter Milton's line of eleven syllables

Distúrbéd not, waítíng close the appróach of mórn.

[*Paradise Lost.*]

But suppose that we omit the syllable "close." The remaining line,

Distúrbéd not, waítíng the appróach of mórn,

is a heroic line in good and regular standing—but a tetrameter.

¹ University of Michigan, August, 1912. The readers were Professors Meader and Sheppard and the writer, and twenty-two readings were taken, most of them by Meader and Sheppard. See "A Scientific Basis for Metrics," *Modern Language Notes*, May, 1913.

We have noticed that readers, more or less unconsciously, have made our line a tetrameter. It is probable that poets also, more or less unconsciously, have made it a tetrameter. A reader often argues that the line is pentameter because he can scan it as pentameter,

Tee-túm tee-túm tee-túm tee-túm tee-túm
A thínġ of beáuty ís a jŏy fŏrġver,

being wholly influenced by the bugaboo of classic scansion, and quite regardless of the fact that he does not *read* the line in this way at all. So, probably, a poet using heroic tetrameters unconsciously, calls them pentameters because they might be read so, and not because he would like to have them read so.

The first evidence that poets have used the heroic tetrameter as a tetrameter is one stated in an earlier paper, that Shakespeare seems to have used the line as a formal relief from monotony when his verse was most rigid. It occurs oftener, therefore, in the earlier plays, and so furnishes a chronology test for the plays.¹ When there were

¹ *New Shakespeareana*, January, 1911, p. 14.

Play	Approximate Date	Percentage
* <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	1589	12.1
<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	1584-89	13.4
<i>Comedy of Errors</i>	1589-91	15.2
‡ <i>Henry VI</i>	1591-92	14.8
‡ <i>Henry VI</i>	1591-92	13.8
<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>	1593	14.2
<i>Richard III</i>	1593	16
<i>Richard II</i>	1593	14.2
<i>Midsummer-Night's Dream</i>	1594	13.2
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	1594	11.4
<i>King John</i>	1595	14.2
1 <i>Henry IV</i>	1596	14.6
<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	1596	11.9
‡ <i>Henry IV</i>	1598	14.5
<i>Henry V</i>	1599	12.9
<i>As You Like It</i>	1599	10.8
† <i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	1599	6.4
<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>	1599	12
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	1600	10.9
<i>Hamlet</i>	1600	10.4
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	1600	10.2
<i>All's Well</i>	1601	10.1
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	1599-1605	10.6
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	1603	9.7
<i>Othello</i>	1604	9.5
<i>King Lear</i>	1605	7.1
<i>Macbeth</i>	1606	8.6
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	1608	7.7
<i>Coriolanus</i>	1609	6.2
<i>Winter's Tale</i>	1610	7.4
<i>Cymbeline</i>	1610	6.9
‡ <i>Henry VIII</i>	1611	7.3
<i>Tempest</i>	1612	6.1

* Corrected in 1597.

† 266 verses.

‡ Act I, scenes 1, 2; Act II, scene 3; Act III, scene 2 to King's exit; Act V, scene 1.

fewer run-on lines, fewer lines with light endings, and so on, Shakespeare relieved his verse by occasionally passing to another meter, using a line that had been allowed in heroic verse from the time of Chaucer.

In order to appreciate the value of this relief, let us consider a passage that neglects it entirely, taken from the *Steele Glas* by George Gascoigne, 1576. So far as I have read (not far) Gascoigne does not use the heroic tetrameter at all. He follows consistently the rule that "we vse none other order but a foote of two sillables, wherof the first is depressed or made short, and the second is eleuate or made long: and that sound or scanning continueth throughout the verse." Gascoigne himself must have been conscious of the monotony of his verses, for he says a few lines later, "And surely I can lament that wee are fallen into suche a playne and simple manner of wrything, that there is none other foote vsed but one. . . . But since it is so, let vs take the forde as we finde it." As a result of taking the ford as he finds it, Gascoigne writes hundreds of verses of which the following are typical:

The Nightingale, whose happy noble hart,
No dole can daunt, nor feareful force affright,
Whose chereful voice, doth comfort saddest wights,
When she hir self, hath little cause to sing.
Whom louers loue, bicause she plaines their greues,
She wraies their woes, and yet relieues their payne,
Whom worthy mindes, alwayes esteemed much,
And grauest years, haue not disdaine hir notes;
(Only that king, proud Tereus by his name,
With murdring knife, did carue hir pleasant tong,
To couer so, his owne foule filthy fault).

The opening lines of *Richard III* are practically all end-stopped, like the Gascoigne lines, but in the first thirteen lines Shakespeare has put five heroic tetrameters, so that any Gascoigne monotony is at once out of the question. This monotony could be restored, in large measure, by arbitrarily reading all the tetrameters as pentameters:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York—

a thing we are by no means willing to do, although we have been quite willing to *scan* the lines as pentameters.

As a second evidence that poets have considered our line a tetrameter, we may notice certain cases in which two consecutive dimeter lines combined make a heroic tetrameter. Then, if twice two is four in this field of investigation, we have an illustration of our law. We have in recognized dimeter the following couplets:

Comes this way sailing
Like a stately ship;
[Milton, *Samson*.]

The pleasant waters
Of the river Lee
.
Their thunder rolling
From the Vatican;
[Mahony, *Bells of Shandon*]

They see the Centaurs
In the upper glens;
[M. Arnold, *Strayed Reveller*.]

The three blind sisters
With their lamps of gold.
[Schütze, *Translation of Maeterlinck*.]

Each of the foregoing illustrations gives us a pair of dimeter lines which may be read as a single heroic line, and in this line it is the "evident intention of the poet" that there should be four feet and not five. We have evidence, then, that certain poets have recognized the heroic tetrameter, albeit in two parts.

This evidence is particularly clear in the following illustration, taken from Matthew Arnold's "Voice." We have the passage

Prayers that tomorrow shall in vain be sped,
and ten lines later,

Strains of glad music at a funeral.

Now one of these passages is written by the poet as a dimeter couplet and one as a single heroic line. If the reader is not too familiar with the poem, it might interest him to determine which is the couplet and which the single line, and to ask himself whether the two forms might not be interchanged without affecting the sound of the passage in the least.

Besides the dimeter couplets, there are lines of our type in recognized tetrameter which would pass for heroic lines if found in heroic verse. Consider the line

Three days the flowers of the garden fair
in connection with the line

To rain a shower of commanded tears.

If the context were not known, I doubt if one could tell with certainty whether both lines occur in tetrameter, or both in pentameter, or whether one line is of one kind and one of the other. In order to strengthen this impression, I omit the references, and only wish that the lines were less familiar.

If the reader has satisfied himself with regard to these lines, let him consider the following:

When spite of cormorant devouring Time
and

Black as a cormorant the screaming blast,
and let him answer to his own satisfaction the same questions regarding them: Are both lines in pentameter or both in tetrameter? And if one is in pentameter and one in tetrameter, which is which?

But the following lines are surely heroic tetrameters in the midst of ordinary tetrameters:

I shake the hours in the hour glass;
[A. Symons, *Dance of Seven Deadly Sins*.]

Each evolution of perfecting plan;
[R. H. McCarthney, *Anti-Christ*.]

When France was glorious and blood red, fair;
[Swinburne, *Les Noyades*.]

That he was never on a woman born;
[From Percy Fol. MS (modernized).]

Carry us over on your nice white back;
[Grimm's *Household Stories*, trans. by Lucy Crane.]

I may pray different from other men

. . . .
To hell with Texas and the skew-ball black.
[Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*.]

Such use, however, is not common. To find the line used more frequently in this way, we turn to "The Congo" by Vachel Lindsay.

The rhythm of this poem is set up as tetrameter by such uncompromising lines as:

Mumbo-jumbo will hoo-doo you
and
Boom-lay, boom-lay, boom-lay boom.

In the third part of the poem, still tetrameter, we have a passage where the heroic tetrameters follow each other in rapid succession (the theme at this point is not heroic):

A good old negro in the slums of the town
Preached at a sister for her velvet gown.
Howled at a brother for his low-down ways
His prowling, guzzling, sneak-thief days.
Beat on the Bible till he wore it out
Starting the jubilee revival shout.
And some had visions, as they stood on chairs
And sang of Jacob, and the golden stairs.

Lindsay also uses the heroic tetrameter in heroic verse. For example:

Into the acres of the new-born state
He poured his strength and plowed his ancient name;
[*The Proud Farmer.*]
Worn out with honors and apart from her
They died as many a self made exile dies.
[*The Hearth Eternal.*]

There is another interesting evidence of a poet's using the heroic tetrameter as a tetrameter. In his poem of five stanzas, "Corinna's Going A-Maying," Herrick writes a heroic couplet in the middle of each stanza with the exception of the fifth, but in the fifth the first line is a heroic tetrameter, and the second an eight-syllable tetrameter:

And as a vapour or a drop of rain
Once lost can ne'er be found again.

Inasmuch as this is the only metrical irregularity in the poem, and as Herrick's verse is well known for its fineness of finish, is it not clear that the second line was written, consciously or unconsciously, as a metrical equivalent for the first? If this is so, the poet must have conceived of the line

And as a vapour or a drop of rain
as a tetrameter.

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